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## A Sociocultural Model of Youth Political Disengagement: Political Distrust amidst Varying Country Contexts

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**Abstract:** Although youth's growing sense of agency is a motive for political engagement, a sizable number has been politically disengaged. If political engagement is construed in the Vygotskian sense as mediated by the economic and sociocultural context, then countries' prevailing levels of political engagement should covary with their economic and sociocultural conditions. Country profiles, however, do not readily reveal this covariation. Youth political disengagement is present in various types of countries: economically developed countries with a strong democratic system, economically developing countries who are transitioning to democracy, and countries experiencing political unrest or disorder. This study aims to determine systematic covariations among youth's political disengagement and their countries' economic and sociocultural conditions. Cluster analyses were conducted on the 2004 and 2014 citizenship modules of the International Social Science Programme. Cluster 1 (high-income countries, many from Western Europe) shows that high levels of trust and engagement are built on strong economic and pro-democratic sociocultural foundations. The kind of political exclusion that youth experience in different contexts is suggested by Cluster 2 (from various regions and of differing income classes) and Cluster 3 (countries with marked social inequality). Distrust and disengagement acting in synchrony is a potential mark of exclusion amidst favorable economic and democratic cultures (Cluster 2). On the other hand, disengagement unaccompanied by distrust is a potential mark of exclusion amidst unfavorable sociopolitical conditions (Cluster 3). Implications to political socialization of youth are discussed.

**Key Words:** International Social Science Programme; political distrust; sociocultural model; Vygotsky; youth political disengagement

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Constructive social change is initiated by a politically engaged citizenry, with the youth forming a pivotal sector as they are socialized in the civic and political scenario. Although youth's growing competence and preference for explorations (Arnett, 2002) are motives for political engagement, a sizable

portion of the youth sector has been disengaged (Farthing, 2010).

Political disengagement may arise from distrust in the competence and uprightness of government officials and institutions (Coe & Vandergrift, 2005) and in the meaningfulness and effectivity of political discourse (Henn, Weinstein, & Forrest, 2005). Political distrust alone would not explain disengagement, however. Economic, social,



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and cultural contexts are the backdrop of political engagement and determine which sectors are included in political discourse.

In this paper, we argue that political engagement is a cultural-historical “activity” in the Vygotskian sense (Kozulin, 1986; Somekh & Nissen, 2011). We propose that political engagement is a goal-oriented activity exercised by the individual through the mediation of others in the individual’s economic and sociocultural context. In other words, the prevailing level of political disengagement in a country coexists, not only with the prevailing level of psychological distrust, but also with the mediating economic and sociocultural conditions.

Thus, we examine cross-country patterns of how disengagement is spawned by the mediating context. This kind of examination is significant in a number of respects. First, it underlines Vygotsky’s theory of mediated activity through an empirical investigation set in a present-day concern. Indeed, political activity is an appropriate area of Vygotskian analysis as it is markedly contextualized, being bounded by the sociocultural milieu. Second, the choice of youth as the population of study (18-25 years) situates the investigation still within the purview of learning. Third, when the socially excluded sector is still being socialized in political discourse, as in the case of the youth sector, the personal and societal consequences of social exclusion can be longer and lasting.

### *1.1 Country Variations in Youth Political Engagement*

If political engagement is mediated by the economic and sociocultural conditions of countries, then covariations between these two factors are expected. Country profiles, however, do not readily reveal these covariations. Political disengagement among youth is present in various types of countries: economically developed countries with a strong democratic system, economically developing countries who are transitioning to democracy, and countries experiencing political unrest or disorder.

Among economically developed countries with a strong democratic system, youth political participation has declined (Diesing, 2013). In 2001, Great Britain has experienced the lowest turnout of young first-time voters since wartime (Kimberlee, 2002). Europe’s prevailing democratic discourse has not been effective in encouraging youth political participation even when the youth remain interested

in politics (Cammaerts, Bruter, Banaji, Harrison, & Anstead, 2013).

Among countries with a less solid history of democratic discourse, including post-communist Eastern European countries, youth political engagement has also been on a decline (Haerpfer, Wallace, & Spanring, 2002). Bulgarian students generally prefer to emigrate as they have come to critically view their country’s political system (Ádnanes, 2004). Croatian university students have been interested in politics and accepting of democratic values, but are distrustful of political institutions (Gvozdanović, A. (2010).

Asian democracies have seen a trend both of youth political engagement and disengagement. Indian youth are reported to be disinclined towards political participation (Banerjee, 2013). Japanese youth’s political apathy makes them withdraw from political participation (Tsukada, 2015). South Korean youth, however, have exhibited increasing political engagement as they shift away from traditional Korean values (Ahmad, Eun, & Sulastry, 2012).

Also of interest are countries that have been experiencing political unrest. During Chile’s final transition to democracy, youth have challenged the status quo and worked towards reducing social inequality (Martínez, Silva, Carmona, & Cumsille (2012). Venezuelan youth have registered their demands for social justice and good governance (Fernandez, 2014). There are, however, accounts of political disengagement. Turkish youth have not been as politically involved because of the limited attention given to them by government and civil society (Sener, 2014). Mexican youth have shown low levels of trust in political institutions and parties (Reimers & Cardenas, 2010). Filipino youth’s political engagement has been undermined by political patronage and political leadership by the elites (Velasco, n.d.).

### *1.2 Economic and Sociocultural Contexts of Political Disengagement*

The context of political action within a citizenry includes economic and political efficacy (Martinez, Silva, Carmona, & Cumsille, 2012), social inequality (Thorne, 2006), and a civic and democratic culture (Muller & Seligson, 1994). We examine the context of political disengagement in terms of economic output and social inequality (GDP *per capita* and Gini coefficient), sociopolitical conditions (quality of functioning of government and democratic



political culture), and the cultural dimensions that define the endorsed types of relationship in society (power distance and individualism).

The level of youth disengagement is likely to covary with the country's state of economy, inequality, and youth distrust as suggested, for example, by high levels of youth's abstention from voting and distrust in government during the socioeconomic crisis in Spain (Belando-Montoro, Gonzalo, & Guio, 2014). Youth's distrust in country politics will likely predict disengagement, given their increasing capacity to criticize political figures (Cook, 1985) and their perception that social inequality constrains their participation (Cammaerts, Bruter, Banaji, Harrison, & Anstead, 2013).

Cultural expectations and norms about relations with authority (power distance) and the primacy of the individual over the collective (individualism) are also part of the activity system of political engagement. The acceptance or endorsement of power disparities (i.e., large power distance) is associated with higher social inequality and less democratic practices; the primacy of the individual over the collective (i.e., high individualism) is associated with greater national wealth (Hofstede, 2001). Although power and individualism are general cultural traits rather than particular sociopolitical ones, their analogs in people's political attitude have been empirically established (Schwartz, Caprara, & Vecchione, 2010).

## 2. METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Participants

This study used the Citizenship modules I (year 2004) and II (year 2014) of the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP Research Group, 2012, 2016). Data from 37 and 33 countries from Citizenship I and II, respectively, were analyzed. Participants were ages 18 to 25 ( $n = 6,710$  and  $5,507$  for Citizenship I and II).

### 2.2 Measures

**Political disengagement** was measured in terms of (a) engaging in discourse (e.g., contacting a public official or the media to express one's views); (b) contributing to a position or advocacy (e.g., attending a demonstration, political meeting, or rally); (c) understanding of political issues (e.g., being better informed politically than others). **Political distrust** was measured in terms of (a) perception that

government listens to people (e.g., legislature gives attention to demands); (b) assessment of national elections (e.g., honest reporting and counting of votes); (c) quality of public service (e.g., committed public service); (d) perception of politicians (e.g., can be trusted).

**Economic output** was indicated by the GDP *per capita* (in current US dollars) in 2005 and 2014 (UNDP; 2018). **Economic inequality** was indicated by the Gini coefficient in 2004 and 2014 (World Bank, 2018). Country scores for **individualism and power distance** were obtained from Hofstede (2018). **Government functioning and democratic political culture** are components of the Economist Intelligence Unit's Index of Democracy obtained in 2008 and 2014. Functioning of government refers to free elections of representatives and checks and balances, among others. Democratic political culture refers to societal consensus and cohesion and popular support for democracy, among others.

## 3. RESULTS

Two-, three-, four-, and five-means cluster analyses were conducted after all variables have been transformed to z-scores. The three-means cluster analysis resulted in the largest mean distances between clusters. The resulting three clusters significantly differ in all the variables. The cluster membership and countries' Euclidean distance from their cluster means are shown in Table 1, while the Figures 1 and 2 show the clusters' means, respectively, for 2004 and 2014.

Cluster membership for 2004 and 2014 is similar. Cluster 1, which includes high-income and several European countries, is lower in political distrust and disengagement than Clusters 2 and 3; it is also lower in power distance, higher in individualism, and has better government functioning and democratic political culture.

Cluster 2 countries are from various regions (Europe, Asia, and South America) and of different income classes. In contrast to Cluster 1 European countries, Cluster 2 European countries are from the Eastern bloc or formerly a part of the Soviet Union.

Cluster 3 has the smallest membership and includes, in both 2004 and 2014, Venezuela, the Philippines, Russia, and South Africa; it has marked social inequality (significantly higher Gini coefficients) compared to Clusters 1 and 2.

Table 1. Cluster compositions for 2004 and 2014

Year 2004		Year 2014	
Country	Distance from cluster center	Country	Distance from cluster center
Cluster 1			
Ireland	0.31	Germany	0.24
Australia	0.33	Finland	0.37
New Zealand	0.37	Netherlands	0.41
Great Britain	0.38	Australia	0.43
Netherlands	0.38	Denmark	0.46
Canada	0.39	Iceland	0.48
Germany	0.40	Great Britain	0.52
Sweden	0.42	Sweden	0.56
Finland	0.44	Austria	0.58
Switzerland	0.49	Belgium	0.64
Norway	0.52	Switzerland	0.68
United States	0.52	United States	0.68
Austria	0.53	France	0.73
Belgium	0.59	Norway	0.84
France	0.70	Israel	0.86
Denmark	0.80		
Israel	0.82		
Cluster 2			
Slovenia	0.48	Czech Republic	0.45
Poland	0.50	Poland	0.47
Czech Republic	0.51	Lithuania	0.54
South Korea	0.53	South Korea	0.56
Taiwan	0.60	Slovenia	0.58
Spain	0.65	Croatia	0.59
Latvia	0.69	Japan	0.59
Uruguay	0.69	Taiwan	0.61
Japan	0.71	Spain	0.70
Portugal	0.72	Slovakia	0.76
Slovakia	0.77	India	0.84
Bulgaria	0.80	Chile	0.88
Hungary	0.81	Hungary	0.91
Cluster 3			
Mexico	0.31	Turkey	0.37
Brazil	0.64	Venezuela	0.53
Venezuela	0.64	Philippines	0.55
Philippines	0.72	Russia	0.84
Chile	0.74	South Africa	1.20
Russia	1.07		
South Africa	1.08		

Cluster analyses of country scores for 2004 and 2014 yielded similar profiles of disengagement. Cluster 1 shows that high levels of trust and engagement are built with strong economic and pro-democratic sociocultural foundations. Clusters 2 and 3, which exhibit higher levels of disengagement, suggest differing patterns of disengagement.

Compared to Cluster 3, Cluster 2 exhibits a high level of distrust despite better government functioning and stronger democratic political culture. For the Eastern European countries in Cluster 2, the high level of distrust possibly emanates from the countries' former political system. Cluster 3 has a

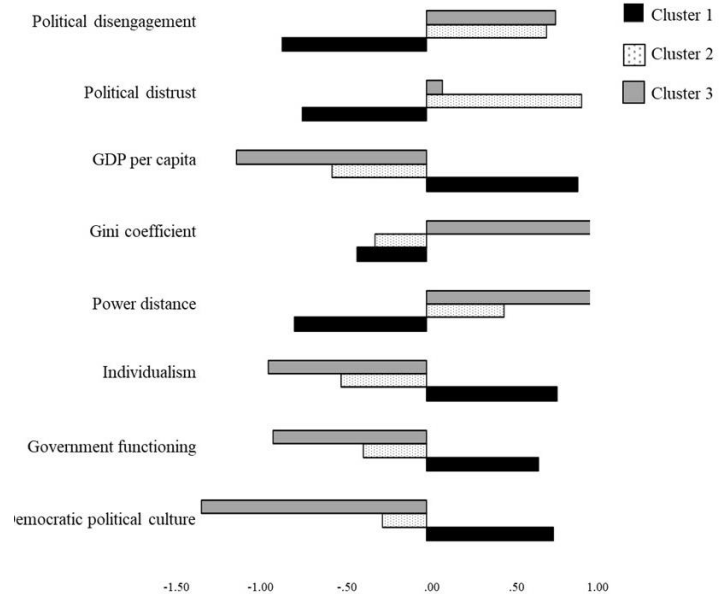


Fig. 1. Cluster means for Year 2004

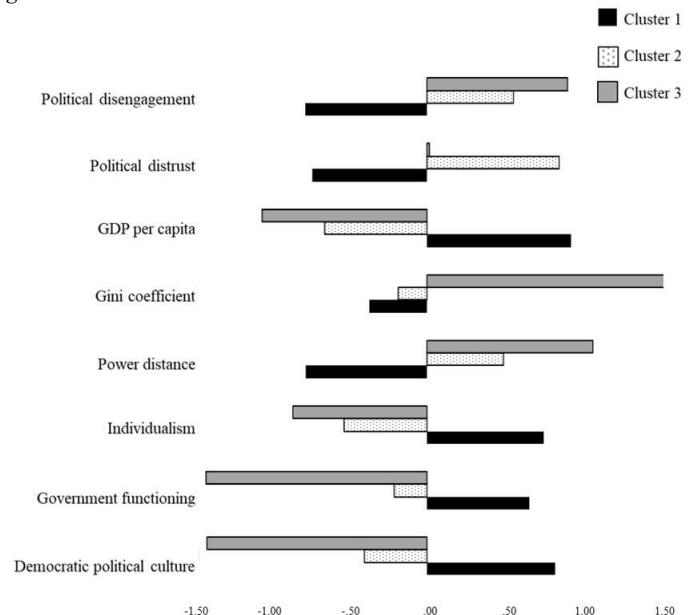


Fig. 2. Cluster means for Year 2004

level of disengagement comparable to Cluster 2, but a lower level of distrust; it also has greater social inequality, worse government functioning, and weaker democratic political culture. Clusters 2 and 3 suggest the kind of political exclusion that youth may





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experience in different contexts: distrust and disengagement acting in synchrony is a potential mark of exclusion amidst favorable economic and democratic cultures (Cluster 2); on the other hand, disengagement unaccompanied by distrust is a potential mark of exclusion amidst unfavorable sociopolitical conditions (Cluster 3).

#### 4. DISCUSSION

Youth political disengagement is generated in different contexts and strengthening political engagement will entail different mechanisms in accordance with the context. In a thriving sociopolitical culture (Cluster 2), disengagement will have untoward consequences for democratic politics (Asen, 2004); however, introducing various forms of government- or people-initiated political activities, specially discourses, is possible within this context and should be encouraged. The goal in this context then is to make citizenship an “active, willful uptake” (p. 96, Asen, 2004). With a weaker sociopolitical culture but with less threat of political distrust (Cluster 3), disengagement likely reflects context conditions not conducive to citizens’ political discourse and action than it is of citizens’ inherent disinclination towards discourse and action. In this case, diverse and novel movements for social change can be initiated by the citizenry in partnership with youth and working beyond the constraints of the prevailing sociopolitical culture. Given youth’s stake in the future and their inclination towards explorations in general (Arnett, 2002), there is promise for the thriving of less formal and mainstream political engagement, such as government pressures and service projects (Wood, 2010).

The Vygotskian notion of sociocultural mediation of activity finds its rightful application in political attitude, thought, and behavior. This application can be brought further by moving the focus to human agency and how it is played out in zones of proximal political development, how it can be the foundation of political engagement, and, ultimately, of social and political change. The application of Vygotsky’s principles to politics extend beyond political engagement. Investigations on political thought and behavior have been done with a distinctly sociocultural perspective, such as those on peace-building initiatives (Sahovic, 2007) and corruption (Tong, 2014). In these and similar studies,

political thought and behavior have been shown to be socioculturally embedded. The challenge now is to examine how human agency surfaces from various social and political expectations and norms and across various forms of political engagement.

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